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The Scrambled Script: Contingency and Necessity in Iris Murdoch's *The Green Knight*

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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1 This paper on Iris Murdoch's penultimate novel *The Green Knight* (1993) begins not in London, where much of that novel is set, but in a remote part of south-eastern Switzerland known as Sils-Maria. In that region there is a lake, Lake Silvaplana, which holds a special place in the history of modern thought. In August 1881, a solitary walker happened upon a large, uniquely shaped rock on the shores of that lake, where he had a revelation that would revolutionize his thought. 'That day I was walking through the woods along the lake of Silvaplana; at a powerful pyramidal rock not far from Surlei I stopped', he writes. 'It was then that this idea came to me' (Nietzsche 1989, 295). The solitary walker was the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and, as this passage from his autobiography *Ecce Homo* (1888) recounts, the concept he had discovered there was 'the idea of the eternal recurrence, this highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable' (295). Why this passage from Nietzsche is so central to an understanding of *The Green Knight* may not be immediately apparent but, in keeping with the spirit of Nietzsche's discovery, it is a moment to which I shall return at the conclusion of this paper in order to explain its importance in more detail.

The Scrambled Script

2 This subversion of the usual rules of academic clarity may seem unsettling, but let us not forget that the human inability to grasp the full significance of lived experiences when we first encounter them is a crucial part of what Murdoch is exploring in *The Green Knight*. In what Nick Turner calls 'one of Murdoch's longest and most puzzling novels', the key to understanding the logic of this difficult text lies in realizing the crucial role played by repetition in the process of understanding (Turner 118). At the center of the novel's plot, for instance, is Peter Mir's insistence on a re-enactment of his first encounter with step-brothers Lucas and Clement Graffe, a fateful night when Lucas, instead of murdering his brother as intended, appears to kill Peter with a blow to the head from a baseball bat. The crucial repetition of this scene makes possible the recovery of Peter's memory and sense of self, driving Murdoch's self-consciously theatrical plot into its next act. At the same time, the initial scene was already, in a sense, a kind of repetition, a psychological replay of the sibling rivalry simmering between Lucas and Clement. This connection is enhanced by Lucas's employment of the same bat the boys once used in their sadistic childhood game of 'Dogs'. At yet another level, the tension between the two brothers can be read as the latest permutation of a mythical trope that, as Lucas points out, goes back to ancient times: 'Why did Cain kill Abel? Why did Romulus kill Remus?' (Murdoch 1995, 88). This human curiosity to come to grips with dark and traumatic experiences drives Murdoch's characters to repeat them. For instance, what does Harvey Blacket do when he returns to the bridge in Italy where he so disastrously injured his foot? He jumps right back up and walks along its precarious balustrade, an act he describes as a 'kind of homeopathy', a repetition that is required in order to 'complete the cure' (459). Such returns are the primary method offered in the novel for understanding the baffling events of life: Murdoch's characters repeat in order to comprehend what happened to them.

3 Yet this 'homeopathic' method is far from being straightforward, for repetitions often spin off in unexpected directions, with consequences that obscure as much as they reveal. Peter's sudden recollection of his Buddhist past, for instance, transforms his character in a positive way, but this metamorphosis also turns out to be something of a false revelation. He is not a psychoanalyst, as he initially claimed, but a rich butcher, and his dramatic departure in the middle of a dinner party at the instigation of his doctor, and subsequent unexpected death in hospital, leave his new-found friends with a host of unanswered questions. Such fragmentation is a phenomenon that has been much discussed by critics of the novel, particularly in relation to the fact that Murdoch's novel, by its very title, signals itself as a reprise of the medieval classic *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Yet as Liliana Sikorska points out, the connection between these two texts is anything but simple:

> Iris Murdoch's novel is not a historical novel, neither is it a translation of the medieval into the contemporary, a simple rewriting of a medieval story with contemporary characters replacing the medieval ones. Rather the medieval *Green Knight* glosses the contemporary one. The connection between the two texts is as much intertextual as it is philosophical. (Sikorska 262)

4 Sikorska is not alone in this opinion, with Milada Franková similarly pointing out that 'Murdoch [only] retains the outer framework of the Beheading Game of retribution and mercy, the themes of virtue and truth and certainly the enigmatic mood. The rest is jumbled, reversed or hinted at by allusions' (Franková 79). Murdoch fails to follow the

pattern established by the earlier text in her novel in any meaningful way. Rather than a straightforward tracing, her repetition of the script provided by *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is modified, jumbled, and scrambled in such a way that the influence of the original is barely recognizable. Repetition may be the chosen method toward understanding, but this particular repetition, far from being faithful or mindless, turns out to be wild and unpredictable to the point of chaos.

5 Such divergence is visible in all of Murdoch's textual repetitions in the novel and may be seen, at one level, as an attempt by her characters to assert their freedom. The existence of a pre-existing narrative acts as a kind of prescribed path, a predestination that can feel like a form of imprisonment. The literary device of characters slavishly following prescribed conventions is a defining staple of modern literature, from Don Quixote's mad adherence to medieval romances, to Catherine Morland's devotion to Gothic novels in Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), to Julien Sorel's desire to model himself on Napoleon and Rousseau in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1831). The peculiarly English twist on this theme that we see in Murdoch's work is due, in part, to the influence of E.M. Forster, whose ironic take on the English propensity for sticking rigidly to convention is central to his novelistic vision: the Baedeker travel guide is the essential text for English tourists visiting Italy in *A Room With a View* (1908), for instance. W.S. Hampl argues that there is a 'queering' of social and familial configurations in Murdoch's work, 'as a result of the destruction of traditional sexual categories, the point toward which Murdoch's writings commonly strive' (Hampl 658). This tendency stems from the same impetus toward a repetition that critically rearranges things in a newly 'queer' way, and also testifies to the legacy of Forster.

6 While this argument provides us with some insight into some aspects of *The Green Knight*, especially the queer configurations that develop around the character of Bellamy James, it does not fully explain the larger question of Murdoch's decision to scramble the various narrative 'scripts' that are referenced in the course of the novel. Certainly, there is an element of rebelling against convention in Murdoch's ironic 'queering' and parodying of the reader's expectations, but these twists on familiar stories are supplemented, as Carla A. Arnell explores, by a simultaneous proliferation and fragmentation of Murdoch's points of reference:

> Familiar as Murdoch's mythic materials are, as they surface in her novel, they appear uncommonly strange, too – akin to shipwrecked fragments in a much larger sea of stories [. . .]. Murdoch leaves neither character nor plot entirely intact in her revision of the novel's primary source, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In Murdoch's hands, the shape of this medieval romance is peculiarly borrowed, bent, and ultimately even 'broken'. (Arnell 72)

7 This aesthetic is, in this respect, less like Forster than T.S. Eliot, a wasteland of narrative fragments in which storylines proliferate and intersect. For Arnell, this fragmentation—or 'mythic brokenness'—interrupts the imperative aspect of narrative repetition, 'a narrative technique meant to allow Murdoch's characters greater freedom' (79). The metaphorical cracks that emerge in the process of retelling earlier narratives, in other words, are what allow her characters to subvert and change the stories to suit their own ends.

8 There is also a tension in this mode of presentation, a sense of theater that the characters both adopt and implicitly strive against. Aleph, for instance, observes early in the novel that 'Yes, we are players, actors', and yet Murdoch follows this up by stating that 'they could agree that there was nothing in the world more natural than

their mutual mode of speech': the unnaturalness of their dramatic dialogue is identified as uncanny and artificial, and yet it is nonetheless accepted as 'natural' (Murdoch 1995, 38). A similar twist occurs in Murdoch's description of Bellamy, who has recently decided to quit his quotidian life in order to devote himself to God. 'Bellamy removed his black jacket and undid his white shirt', writes Murdoch. 'Since his "decision" he had dressed always in black and white, a solemnity undermined by Clement who said he was just always playing Hamlet' (44–45). Bellamy's drastic decision to pursue a spiritual life thus leads him to dress as the character in English literature who represents the epitome of indecisiveness. No allusion in Murdoch's novel is safe from this repeated twisting and reshaping, to the point where the system of references may be declared, in Arnell's words, 'broken'. The artificial is natural, the decisive is indecisive, and convention is subversion: in short, everything in the Murdochian universe is subject to a potentially infinite reversibility that makes it impossible to settle on a single point of meaning.

9 This fragmentation results not only from Murdoch's playfully loose correspondences between her characters and the references to which she compares them, but also from the sheer proliferation of allusions with which she connects them. Peter Mir serves as a particularly useful example in this regard. Kanan Savkay, for instance, argues that Peter represents the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. 'Not only is the novel's protagonist, Peter Mir, of Russian-Jewish origin and living as an immigrant—just like Levinas', writes Savkay, 'but Peter's ideas on justice and the other appear to coincide with those of the philosopher' (Savkay 2). In *Iris Murdoch: A Literary Life* (2010), Priscilla Martin and Anne Rowe point out the similarities between Peter Mir and Jesus Christ. 'There are blows, magicians, temptations and justice in both, but no exact correspondences [. . .]. Like Christ, Peter has in some sense died in place of another and has in some sense come back from the dead' (Martin and Rowe 157). Martin and Rowe's caveat that there are 'no exact correspondences' is an important one, because the number of possible precursors that Peter Mir might resemble does not end there:

> When Louise returned to the Aviary the others were playing the game of what character in fiction Peter Mir reminded them of.
> 'I think he's Mr Pickwick', said Louise.
> 'Oh no! Never!' said Sefton. 'I think he's more like Prospero'.
> 'I think he's the Green Knight', said Aleph. 'Come on, Moy, what do you think?'
> 'I think he's the Minotaur'.
> 'The Minotaur isn't a literary character, he's a mythical character', Sefton objected.
> 'Oh really–!'
> 'What does Clement think?' said Aleph.
> 'I think he's Mephistopheles.' said Clement. (Murdoch 195)

10 In addition to Levinas, Christ, Mr. Pickwick, Prospero, the Green Knight, the Minotaur, and Mephistopheles, Peter Mir is elsewhere compared in the novel to Lazarus (117), Rembrandt's *The Polish Rider* (342), and 'something out of *Beowulf*' (215). This dizzying multiplication of references is not limited to Peter Mir, with many of the other characters subject to similarly manifold points of comparison—thus, Clement is Harlequin, Joan Blacket is Circe, Moy is Andromeda, Aleph is a Valkyrie, and Tessa Millan is the Cheshire Cat. Murdoch's allusions appear and proliferate with dizzying speed, pieces of meaning that are taken up briefly, like masks, and then discarded for something else. Far from increasing meaning, this flood of signification creates a cacophony, a scrambled script pieced together from fragments that, in their heterogeneity, never come together to form a unified whole.

Contingency and Necessity

11 In order to make sense of Murdoch's orchestrated chaos, commentators on Murdoch's work have frequently turned to philosophical interpretations. Miles Leeson, for instance, argues in *Iris Murdoch: Philosophical Novelist* (2010) that Arthur Schopenhauer is the key figure for unlocking what is at stake in *The Green Knight*. 'Although Lucas is undeniably Nietzschean in form, [. . .] I would argue that it is the influence of Schopenhauer that is central to *The Green Knight*', he contends. 'Schopenhauer's development of Kant's thought is central to seeing *The Green Knight* correctly: what is the connection between the world as it is in itself and the world as it appears to us?' (Leeson 126). Arnell makes a similar point, but replaces Schopenhauer with the more obvious choice of Plato:

> Murdoch's implicit attitude towards myth here bears a clear resemblance to that of the philosopher Plato. Like Plato, Iris Murdoch is suspicious of human myth-making and encourages characters to leave behind false fictions (*mythoi*) in turning towards the light of truth. At the same time, though, it is *through* myth that Murdoch, like Plato, illuminates her characters' quest for the good. (Arnell 82)

12 As a supplement to Leeson's and Arnell's contributions, I would suggest that Murdoch's novel is also influenced in part by Vladimir Nabokov, a Russian (like Peter Mir) whose literary works explore the fine line between imagination and reality. What Nabokov also brings to the table is both a sense of humor and a spirited willingness to mislead his readers. What is the significance of the 999-line poem in *Pale Fire* (1962), for instance? Is Nabokov slyly comparing the 'referential mania' of the son in his story 'Signs and Symbols' (1948) with the reader's desire to decode the elusive meaning of this narrative? Does Murdoch, more pertinently, draw inspiration from Nabokov's early novel *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935) in *The Green Knight*? The playful construction of *The Green Knight* suggests that, while this is indeed a novel that examines the interplay between myth and reality, the attempts to discover the connecting line between these two concepts is often blurry to the point of comedy, even farce.

13 Complicating this issue still further, are what might be called the Nietzschean aspects of the novel. As Leeson points out, Lucas is the character who is mostly closely associated with this perspective, with his outlook referred to, in an allusion to Nietzsche's 1886 work, as '[b]eyond good and evil' (Murdoch 1995, 172) during a conversation between Bellamy and Peter Mir. A humorless scholar, Lucas is, however, closer to a caricature of Nietzsche who, in confronting reality, believes he has stripped life of all its illusions and myths. Lucas's advice to Sefton not to marry for the sake of her intellectual integrity (274) is lifted straight from the Third Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), and is succeeded by a denunciation of historicism that echoes Nietzsche's essay on this topic in *Untimely Meditations* (1876). Despite the centrality of his ideas to *The Green Knight*, however, Nietzsche cannot be allowed to function as a focal point by Murdoch, precisely because the novel, with its aesthetic of scrambling and multiplication, actively rejects the possibility of being solved by a single thinker or idea. Anne Rowe perceptively traces the outlines of this refusal in a chapter on Murdoch's secular theology:

> *The Green Knight* (1994) is much concerned with the nature and function of role models and is one of her most religious in the sense that it is a meditation on how human beings should justly respond to evil [. . .]. Here, it appears that she has lost

> any attempt at a governing vision, there is no incontestable argument for the sovereignty of any position and her compassion assuages any sense of evil. [. . .] *The Green Knight* is an exercise in iconoclasm and here Murdoch provides a moving, self-deprecating deconstructing of herself, her moral philosophy and her neo-theology, as any ideal model. For her, idols are too easily drawn into subjective perceptions of truth, too easily manipulated to serve individual fantasies [. . .] and the sheer complexity of Murdoch's novels resists any attempts at deifying her position. (Rowe 153)

14 Murdoch thus executes a carefully calculated double movement in this novel, in which she gives a prominent place to the ideas of Nietzsche, while taking care to remove him from a position in her text where he might be taken for an idol or savior.

15 For just as Nabokov reveals both the power and illusion of symbols in literary fiction, so too Nietzsche reveals the complex interplay between myth and reality in human experience. When looked at from this perspective, our human evaluation of the world, our desire to find patterns and meanings in how it works, is an arbitrary delusion that only ever reflects our prejudices, never reality as it actually is. Nietzsche makes his bluntest pronouncement on this situation in Section 109 of *The Gay Science* (1882), in which he reminds his readers that the godlessness of the universe results not in a vision of pure, random chaos, but rather a complex dance between contingency and necessity:

> The total character of the world, however, is in all eternity chaos—in the sense not of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms [. . .]. None of our aesthetic and moral judgments apply to it. Nor does it have any instinct for self-preservation or any other instinct; and it does not observe any laws either. Let us beware of saying that there are laws in nature. There are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses. Once you know that there are no purposes, you also know that there is no accident; for it is only beside a world of purposes that the word 'accident' has meaning. Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type. (Nietzsche 1974, 168)

16 This censure of the apparent stupidity of human mythical evaluations of the world, reflected in the novel by Lucas's outlook of stoic bleakness, is counterbalanced by a complementary joy that the iron hand of fate has thereby also been disrupted. In *The Green Knight*, Moy Anderson represents this journey to the other, joyful side of the Nietzschean coin, the birth of an *amor fati* that accepts with happiness in the revelation of the eternal return.

17 Murdoch's novel only makes sense in the light of this interplay between contingency and necessity, with each random event in her narrative zig-zagging through the lives of her characters like a ball launched into a pinball machine. At the re-enactment of Lucas's attack on Peter Mir, for instance, Clement refers to 'the work of chance' (Murdoch 1995, 279) that brought the three of them together. Speaking with the belief that he is somehow directing this piece of 'theatre', this feeling of control is overturned when he appears to see Peter Mir struck by lightning, a symbol of chance. The role of chance is also highlighted by Murdoch when Anax the dog makes his escape, launching a panicked rescue effort. Although the most rational strategy for finding Anax would be to follow the paths where Bellamy, Anax's former owner, once took his dog on their walks together, that option is blocked when his rescuers realize that 'in fact there were hundreds of possible ways and they must decide something at

once' (181). The search for Anax is only a minor incident in the novel, but the narrator reminds the reader that it nonetheless was crucial to the outcome of the plot. 'If at that moment Clement had caught sight of the dog and had managed to capture him, the fates of a number of people in this story would have been entirely different', observes Murdoch. 'Such is the vast play of chance in human lives' (185).

18 In much the same way, Lucas's admonition to Sefton about the dangers of historicism are juxtaposed in the novel to her own habit of imagining how real historical events might have turned out differently, and the consequences such variations might have wrought. In a particularly prescient passage, for instance, Sefton ponders what might have happened if England had not fallen under Norman rule:

> Sefton, abandoning Fisher's *History of Europe*, was now wondering: what would have happened if Harold had defeated the Normans? Or if Canute had lived longer? England would have become part of a Danish confederacy with its capital in Denmark. Europe would have been unified. Would that have been a good thing or a bad thing? (15)

19 A couple of pages later, Sefton has moved on from English history, instead expressing her admiration for Hannibal and wondering how world history might have been different if he had succeeded in conquering Rome. These musings set a pattern in the novel for Sefton, who contemplates various similar questions. If, like his father, Edward III had been murdered, would it have prevented the Hundred Years War (227)? Or later in the novel: 'Where did the Romans come from? If Augustine had not discovered Plato would things have been different? *What* things would have been different? The Renaissance for instance?' (261). Both the public and private worlds that Murdoch presents in *The Green Knight* are subject to this interplay between contingency and necessity, with events gaining their sense of compulsion only from the fact that the characters just happen to be in a particular place at a particular time—walking at night in the park, for instance, at the precise moment when a baseball bat was poised to deliver its murderous blow.

The Eternal Return

20 Despite its apparent chaos, there are nonetheless patterns of repetition that emerge in the world, proclivities that cut a path through existence in much the same way that a trickle of water can, over time, transform into a forceful, raging torrent. Murdoch has a long-standing fascination with the cultural and religious forms these patterns take, with Peter Mir, for instance, referring to the Hindu cycle of reincarnation described in 'the discussion between Krishna and Arjuna' (306) in *The Bhagavad Gita*. Lucas provides a further catalog of these cyclic ideas, describing Peter's experience of returning from the dead as 'something like the Buddhist Bardo, or the Christian Limbo—and the Greeks pictured Hades as a twilit world' (254). Yet these cycles of repetition are experienced as temporal cages, as Harvey explains: 'I feel so trapped. *Eternel retour.* I still don't know what it means, but it's what I feel' (263). The eternal return is experienced here by Harvey as Nietzsche originally describes it in *The Gay Science*, as 'the greatest weight', a fateful burden that is initially perceived as soul-crushing.

21 For Murdoch, these cycles of repetition, however imaginary, form the mythical prisons that humanity must learn, if possible, to free itself. Recall the conclusion of *The Sea, the Sea* (1978)—another text in which Murdoch is engaged in a surreptitious dialogue with

Nietzsche's eternal return, as I explored in an earlier essay—in which James Arrowby uses his powers as a master Bodhisattva to end his own life, thus apparently stepping outside the cycle of the bardo.[1] Yet that novel's real conclusion comes when the imprisoned demon in James's apartment (remembering that it is a demon who announces the eternal return in *The Gay Science*) is released when its container is tipped onto the floor by the hammering of construction workers on the next floor. In a strict sense, therefore, there is no actual conclusion, only an opening onto the next iteration of 'the demon-ridden pilgrimage of human life' (Murdoch 2001, 495). In *The Green Knight*, Aleph also struggles to find a way to transform the eternal return into something open and positive, as she reveals in this conversation with Harvey:

> Aleph laughed and clinked the crutches together. 'Well, one must work, what else is there, what other meaning is there in life?'
> 'You've got that *ewige Wiederkehr* feeling again'.
> 'Nothing so interesting'.
> 'So you're not a romantic any more, youth at the prow and pleasure at the helm, not even the Magus Zoroaster?'
> 'Oh do not speak of him. So you contemplate an extreme act?'
> 'No, I wish I could. We have been so much loved, I can't give life any other meaning, am I supposed now to create new meanings?' (Murdoch 1995, 110–111)

22 Although Murdoch expresses ambivalence about Nietzsche in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), her deeper engagement with his work shines through in a passage replete with Nietzschean allusions, from Harvey's citation of the concept of the eternal return in the original German, to the invocation of Zoroaster, the Greek variation on the ancient sage that Nietzsche chooses as his protagonist in his masterpiece, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883). Aleph eventually finds the solution to her problem by dramatically breaking with her apparent 'fate', the long-held expectation that her intimacy with Harvey will develop into something more, and instead elopes to America with Lucas, thus opening up her life to the 'new meanings' she intimated to Harvey earlier in the novel.

23 This subversion of expected outcomes is the basic configuration for all the characters in *The Green Knight*, who find ways to overcome their 'fated' roles in order to discover, like Aleph, a new and different life for themselves. In this respect, the most important character in the novel is Moy, whose real name is Moira, the Greek word for 'fate', a choice that signals her allegorical role in the story. While it may be tempting to designate Bellamy, with his yearning for spiritual purity, as the Sir Gawain to Peter Mir's Green Knight, Moy is really the character who crucially links together the novel's Nietzschean themes with its medieval prototype. Her status as the real Gawain is signaled, in particular, by her receipt, around the middle of the novel, of a green girdle from Peter Mir (213). This scene is accompanied by Peter's birthday gift to Moy of a decorative box, a kind of mock Holy Grail that, symbolically, turns out to be empty. Much later in the novel, as Moy admires the figure of Rembrandt's *Polish Rider* (recalling that in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche fantasizes about being descended from Polish aristocracy), she compares her own lowly state to this figure's imagined nobility:

> He is courage, he is love, he loves what is good, and will die for it, and his body will be trampled by horses' hooves, and no one will know his grave. She thought, he is so beautiful, he has the beauty of goodness. I am a freak, a crippled animal, something which will be put down and out of its misery, I am a hump-backed dwarf. (386)

24 These last words are again a reference to the eternal return, this time to the section titled 'Of the Vision and the Riddle' in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which the dwarf, rather than a demon, is Zarathustra's interlocutor when formulating this concept. The crucial subplot involving Moy's stones is the culmination of these ideas: the stones symbolize the gravity of fate, while Moy's telekinetic ability to move them with her mind is a secret power born of her teleological thinking. Each stone, she believes, has a rightful place and destiny, and she is overwhelmed by guilt when she thinks of how she has 'wrongly' disrupted these lines by collecting them.

25 The importance of Moy to the overall interpretation of *The Green Knight*, in particular the scene toward the end of the book where she aims to return a stone she has taken from Bellamy's seaside cottage to where she originally found it, has been highlighted by at least two other commentators on Murdoch's novel. Arnell, for instance, argues that 'Moy's eventual quest to return the stone to its home is particularly significant to the meaning of *The Green Knight* because of the way it links Moy's story to Peter Mir's and reveals a larger mythic pattern that ultimately structures many of the other characters' stories as well—a quest to *remember* what is right and fitting' (Arnell 81). In his chapter 'Stories, Rituals and Healers in Iris Murdoch's Fiction', Rob Hardy closes his analysis with an extended reflection on the meaning of Moy's gesture:

> In giving to Moy her own storytelling rights and, in a life starved of external ritual, giving her access to a healing ritual of her own devising, Murdoch offers a view of the soul and its capacity to heal itself [. . .]. Moy, radiating her creator's light, is an image of a person who has to find her own way without the help of psychotherapist or priest. But Murdoch also knew of those whom priests or psychotherapists can help—and one of her triumphs as a novelist is that she so intuitively and delicately distinguishes between the two kinds of person. And in controlling her disapproval of the ritual devised by a disbelieving priest to bring a young woman out of hell, in entering into the mind of a Jungian psychiatrist trying to rescue another of hell's inhabitants, and in telling the story of a young man searching for a healing sign despite himself, Murdoch shows us that the psyche is, in the sense in which Jung meant those words, spiritual and divine. (Hardy 54)

26 Both Arnell and Hardy thus interpret the return of the stone as a movement of resolution and closure, in which the stone's replacement by Moy signals an affirmation of the correct order of things. This shared conclusion, however, goes against every lesson that the novel teaches about the contingency of the world, in which Murdoch shows how the mythical scripts humanity once used to make sense of the world's patterns are really seductive traps. The demon of disorder always returns to disrupt and undo the neat endings that humans devise.

27 Moy's return of the stone to its 'appropriate' place is thus Murdoch's implicit *caricature* of human mythologies of order, an ironic event that is forged from the ridiculous notion that stones have a teleological 'yearning', together with the fact that Moy cannot actually remember the stone's exact location. When Moy cannot find where the stone is supposed to go, it is Anax who leads her to a random place where the stone miraculously fits, an entirely fortuitous site that is almost certainly not the stone's original place of retrieval. The general location that Murdoch chooses for this scene is anything but arbitrary, however, marked as it is by a 'rock, rising high, high out of the grass, a smooth grey pyramid, criss-crossed with hieroglyphics, quite unlike the rocks of the sea, unique, solitary, sacred', an unmistakable echo of the rock Nietzsche describes in *Ecce Homo* as the place where the inspiration for the eternal return first

came to him (Murdoch 1995, 470). This connection is given further weight by the site's description in more recent texts, such as Mark Anderson's fictional reconstruction *Zarathustra Stone* (2011), where he describes Nietzsche's rock as a 'hulking pyramidal stone, alien in its strangeness, mystic in its allure' (Anderson 139). In *I Am Dynamite! A Life of Nietzsche* (2018), Sue Prideaux provides a lengthier depiction:

> Standing on the shore of Lake Silvaplana beside a monumental pyramid-shaped boulder that later he was to name 'Zarathustra's Rock', he conceived the thought of eternal recurrence [. . .]. It can be no coincidence that he expressed the idea of the life of man as the ring of human existence. Wagner had not only composed his Ring but had meticulously structured it as a ring, an eternal recurrence, a circular tale whose hourglass turns and turns again and again. Nietzsche also wrote down the name Zarathustra for the first time in his Sils-Maria notebook, but only the name. Both ideas would take some more years to ripen. (Prideaux 191–192)

28 The scene in which Moy returns the stone is thus overladen with symbolism, in which the figure of fate (Moira) puts down the dead weight of teleological thinking (the stone) and discovers instead the contingent joy of the eternal return. Murdoch's inevitable twist, of course, is that the site of the eternal return is transposed from the shores of Lake Silvaplana to Bellamy's house by the sea, another symbol of endless recurrence, where an undecided future opens before Moy, Bellamy, Clive, and Anax that, like the conclusion of *The Sea, the Sea*, resembles not an ending or a resolution but yet another beginning, another scrambled repetition.

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NOTES

1. See Peter MATHEWS, 'A Subterranean Dialogue with Nietzsche on the Demonic and the Divine in *The Sea, the Sea*', *Iris Murdoch and the Moral Imagination*, ed. M.F. SIMONE ROBERTS, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2010: 190–202.

ABSTRACTS

This paper begins at the rock in Switzerland where Nietzsche came up with his theory of eternal return, with a promise that its connection to Murdoch's *The Green Knight* will be clear by the end. The eternal return introduces the key theme of repetition, from Peter Mir's desire to re-enact his 'death', to Harvey's return to the Italian bridge where he hurt his foot. Murdoch also introduces repetition through her allusions, such as the titular reference to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Murdoch subverts such textual precursors by 'scrambling' their messages, twisting their meanings and mixing them up in a way that removes the possibility of a single, coherent meaning. This 'scrambling' reflects Murdoch's concern with the dual roles of contingency and necessity in human existence. While Murdoch draws on various philosophical and literary influences—Schopenhauer, Plato, even Nabokov—this paper argues that Nietzsche is a particularly important interlocutor here, especially his influence on Lucas and Sefton's critical view of historicism. The final section examines the novel's explicit references to Nietzsche's eternal return, culminating with the scene where Moy returns a stone to its 'rightful' place near Bellamy's seaside cottage. This is Murdoch's ultimate caricature of the human desire to imagine patterns and order in the universe—indeed, the place where Moy carries this out is described in the exact same terms as the rock where Nietzsche discovered the eternal return, creating yet another repetition, and at the same time, another scrambled form.

Cet article commence en Suisse, sur le rocher où Nietzsche a présenté sa théorie de l'éternel retour, avec la promesse que son lien avec *The Green Knight* de Murdoch sera élucidé à la fin. L'éternel retour introduit le thème principal de la répétition, du désir de Peter Mir de reproduire sa « mort » au retour de Harvey sur le pont italien où il s'est blessé au pied. Murdoch introduit également la répétition à travers ses allusions, telles que la référence titulaire à *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Murdoch subvertit ces précurseurs textuels en « brouillant » leurs messages, en modifiant leur signification et en les mélangeant de manière à éliminer toute possibilité de signification unique et cohérente. Ce « brouillage » reflète la préoccupation de Murdoch pour le double rôle de la contingence et de la nécessité dans l'existence humaine. Bien que Murdoch s'appuie sur diverses influences philosophiques et littéraires — Schopenhauer, Platon, même Nabokov — cet article affirme que Nietzsche est l'interlocuteur le plus important ici, en particulier en raison de son influence sur la vision critique de l'historicisme qui est celle de Lucas et Sefton. La dernière section examine les références explicites à l'éternel retour de Nietzsche, qui culmine avec la scène où Moy remet une pierre à sa place « légitime » près du chalet de Bellamy situé en bord de mer. C'est la caricature ultime de Murdoch sur le désir humain d'imaginer des schémas et un ordre dans l'univers — en effet, le lieu où Moy exerce son pouvoir est décrit exactement de la même manière que le rocher où Nietzsche a découvert l'éternel retour, créant une autre répétition, et dans le même temps, un autre script brouillé.

INDEX

Mots-clés: The Green Knight, Nietzsche (Friedrich), contingence, éternel retour, nécessité
Keywords: The Green Knight, Nietzsche (Friedrich), contingency, eternal return, necessity

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